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AUTHOR Holm, Janis Butler
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ABSTRACT

This guide addresses how to both ask for and write letters of recommendations. To ask for a letter of recommendation is to ask for a favor, thus requests should be courteous and unassuming. An appointment to request a letter in person should be made at the professor's convenience, at least a month ahead of the recommendation deadline. If at a distance, write a brief but courteous letter. If the professor agrees to write a letter among the things a student should provide are: recommendation forms with the requisite information typed in; addressed and stamped envelopes; and a list of jobs applied for, with deadlines and names of persons to be addressed. Advice for professors who are writing letters of recommendation includes: do not agree to write a recommendation if unable to write a good one; ask the student to provide the information mentioned previously; and, when writing the letter, avoid referring to gender or race and beware of unconscious stereotyping. (CR)

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The Etiquette of Recommendations: A Graduate Student Guide

by Janis Butler Holm
Ohio University

Every fall I teach a required course for graduate students entering my discipline, one that introduces them not only to research methods but also to certain (sometimes unspoken) conventions of the profession. Though most of the students we accept for graduate study have sufficient training to do the course work assigned them, few come with a thorough understanding of how to negotiate academic business outside of class--of how best to approach such things as writing class evaluations, proposing an independent study course, choosing the chair of a thesis committee, and so forth.

To address some of these concerns, every fall I include a lecture on what I call "academic etiquette," essentially a group of procedures that make academic life more comfortable for both students and professors. Members of the class are usually surprised and amused by this "Miss Manners" approach to higher education, sandwiched between a review of bibliographical formats and a survey of Internet resources. But they are quick to tell me how useful such information can be, especially during the first and somewhat overwhelming year of graduate school.

Particularly popular is the discussion of recommendations--how to ask for them and how to write them. Many students find the business of asking for recommendations a little intimidating and are unsure about exactly how to address a potential recommender. Some of our graduate teaching assistants, leading a class for the first time, are nervous about their responsibilities to undergraduates who ask them for recommendations. While most have a general idea of what is involved, they find it reassuring to have a clear and explicit set of guidelines, such that they can be confident in their approach.

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Faculty members, too, have been especially appreciative of the instruction in recommendation etiquette. Since my introduction of this material into the introductory course, coffee-room complaints about rude, misdirected, and last-minute requests have become infrequent, and my colleagues have noted an increased diplomacy in faculty-graduate student relations. (One has proposed, only partly in jest, that we make recommendation etiquette a requirement for our undergraduate major, so as to improve faculty-undergraduate relations.) As our program enrollment climbs, work loads increase, and recommendation requests multiply, we are all grateful for whatever will promote civility, on either side of the professional degree.

From conversations with colleagues in other academic fields, I have found that, though disciplinary conventions may vary slightly, approaches to recommendations are much the same. The following basic instructions for graduate students and teaching assistants should suit most academic programs and can be easily adapted to fit special disciplinary needs.

Requesting Letters of Recommendation

To ask for a letter of recommendation is to ask for a favor. Your professor is not obliged to write for you (though most are delighted to write for students who have done well in their classes), and to agree to do so is a commitment of time and energy. Requests for recommendations should, therefore, be courteous and unassuming. How you ask for a recommendation can determine the quality of what is written on your behalf.

Don't request a recommendation from someone who hasn't taught you, served on your thesis or examining committee, or observed your teaching, lab work, or other duties. Only those who have firsthand knowledge of your activities can be expected to write about them. Of course, if someone else volunteers to write for you, graciously accept, and offer to provide him or her the necessary information. But don't expect too much from recommenders who cannot say concrete things about your performance. Vague letters, even from the famous, are of little use to evaluation committees.

Ask early, at least a month ahead of your deadline, if possible. Make an appointment at the professor's convenience and ask in person. If you are at a distance, write a courteous letter. Make your request early in the letter, add some pleasantries, and

end. A brief but courteous request generates good feeling and, quite possibly, a better recommendation.

Multiple recommendations are sometimes a necessity, but try to limit your requests. If at all possible, ask for one general recommendation for a placement file. When you are applying for different kinds of positions, don't ask for more than three or four letters from the same professor, unless he or she is your thesis advisor or is in some other way an academic sponsor.

If the professor agrees to write for you, provide the following:

- recommendation forms (if any), with the requisite information typed in (for a more professional presentation).
- addressed and stamped envelopes.
- a list of jobs or positions applied for, with deadlines and the names of persons to be addressed. It is necessary to provide deadlines because the recommender may be writing for a number of students and may not be able to write for you immediately.
- a reminder of the contexts in which the recommender has seen your work (in specific classes, on committees, through having reviewed your research and having suggested publication, etc.).
- any other information pertinent to what the position requires.
- a phone number where you can be reached in case of questions.

Keep all of this material brief, organized, and easy to read.

Do not ask the professor later if he or she has written the recommendation unless the professor has asked to be reminded. If you are concerned, check with someone at the letter's destination a day or so after the deadline. Most deadlines are somewhat flexible and allow for slight delay. If the deadline is past and your letter has not arrived at its destination, approach the professor and explain that it has not been received.

If you know that your application deadline is quite firm and does not permit delay, cover yourself by asking for an extra recommendation, from another professor. Don't "load up"--one extra should be sufficient insurance.

Writing Letters of Recommendation

Remember that most undergraduate students know little about the etiquette of requesting letters of recommendation. Don't hold their ignorance against them. When a student approaches you clumsily, explain the courteous way of going about recommendation requests, and try to write as helpful a letter as you can, focusing on the student's specific strengths.

Don't agree to write a recommendation if you know that you can't write a good one. Gently suggest that some other instructor might be in a better position to judge the student's work.

If you wish to write for the student, ask that he or she provide you the information outlined above. Don't rely on memory--if what you say doesn't match up with the student's dossier and cover letter, you create confusion. Be sure to provide concrete examples to back up your general statements about the student's performance.

When writing your letter, avoid referring to gender, race, or sexuality-specific characteristics, and beware of unconscious stereotyping (for example, in the case of two equally intelligent students, emphasizing the female student's sparkling personality while focusing on the male student's keen analytical skills). Stress those abilities and talents that most clearly speak to the requirements of the job or position sought.

Mail the recommendation well before the deadline. Remember, if time is tight, that express mail makes possible a next-day delivery and that fax machines can deliver even more quickly. (Some evaluators have been known to accept e-mail, in a crunch.) You owe it to the student to meet your commitment. If you absolutely cannot meet the deadline, send the recommendation as quickly as possible thereafter, and call someone at the destination point if the situation seems urgent.

Keep a copy of the recommendation, on disk if possible, so that you may easily retrieve it should the student need another. Be patient with multiple requests--these are competitive times, and students need your support.